

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white, long-sleeved, lace-trimmed dress, stands in profile looking out a window. The scene is dimly lit, with light coming from the window, creating a ghostly atmosphere. The window has a grid pattern. The background is dark, suggesting an interior room.

Barbara Morgan

THE OUTCAST OF ROSENCRAFT



Ghost



Whisper

I

*For all the deceived, for the ones who whisper to the breeze.
For the hopeless romantics, for the visionaries,
for those willing to sacrifice everything to fulfil their dreams.
For the outcasts, the rejects, the misfits. For the truly or supposedly insane.
For the ones with a big heart,
for those who stubbornly believe in the purity of feelings.
For anyone still touched by emotion.
A tribute to grand pursuits, ideas, and dreams.
For those who never give up, for those mocked and judged.
For the poets of the everyday.
For the “vincible”, and for
the defeated who are ready to rise and fight once more.
For the forgotten heroes and the wanderers.
For those who have battled and lost for what they believe in,
yet still feel invincible.
For those unafraid to express their thoughts.
For those who have travelled the world and for those who one day will.
For those who blur the lines between reality and fiction.
For all the wandering knights.
Somehow, it feels right and fitting...
For all the performers.*

(Miguel de Cervantes, “Don Quixote”)¹

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CHAPTER 1

She had been spotted elsewhere, wandering aimlessly, because that's how she navigated life, even before making her way to Rosencraft. Yes, that's precisely how she navigated life—her own and other's. She moved through it and left her mark, wandering without a clear purpose. With her untarnished and unconventional soul, she deluded herself into thinking she was destined for great challenges, great changes, great revolutions—opening minds and hearts. Her actions and demeanour exuded a delicacy and charm that never failed to captivate those who crossed her path. Possessing a somewhat wild beauty and mesmerising eyes, she had drawn the attention of various individuals, including Adam Redwood, descendant of one of Rosencraft's founding families—the Redwoods, to be exact. He found himself captivated by her radiant presence, caught between bliss and ecstasy.

This is how she still manages to gently attract, even when hidden, distant, or possibly dead.

At some point, they started using the term *fatally disappeared* when referring to her in Rosencraft. *Fatally disappeared*.

As if it was *fate* that made her *disappear*.

Whether it was the workings of destiny or not, her perspective on Rosencraft was unequivocal and clear. She conveyed it in her unique style—a perhaps incongruent yet brutally honest expression that resonated with her character and emotions:

“Hearts of stone. Bones of stone. Guts of stone. Stones everywhere. Unsmoothed, unyielding stones.”

These stones were hurled at those labelled as *outcasts*, much like her, *Katherine Kingstone Redwood, the Outcast of Rosencraft*.

‘Everything returns to Rosencraft,’ she began to repeat incessantly.

Even the outsiders, the so-called *outcasts* return. It wasn't just her. There was more than one outcast, and inevitably, their fate would be the same. They were allowed to die, for the most part, succumbing to loneliness and neglect. Ultimately, they succumbed to pain. Even those who once loved and persuaded them to stay in Rosencraft allowed them to perish, day after

day after day. Without acknowledging them, without reacting, without attempting to save them.

However, Katherine was a sort of dramatic exception. She couldn't bring herself to accept that this was her fate. She refused to surrender. She was unwilling to be defeated. Resisting the breaking of her spirit, after confronting numerous challenges, she tenaciously clung to life. She refused to die without putting up a fight, and certainly not without meticulously planned revenge. Not without a confrontation that would entangle all of Rosencraft when the time came.

Left to her own devices, she observed the intricate artistry of spiders. Initially, she developed a sense of respect, which then transformed into admiration, and eventually, she started to venerate it, even attempting to replicate it. Unprecedented patience. The tireless effort of tiny legs. A true work of art. They wove their webs, larger and larger, much like the most skilled and cunning manipulators wove their intrigues to sustain themselves and thrive. She gazed upon these masterful creations with boundless admiration, contemplating how God, the universe, or whoever governs the world, could create something so magical and marvellous. The great creator must indeed be an artist, she thought.

She came to the realisation that the world was essentially the mirrored reflection of a spiderweb—an immense cobweb that connected everything. What she found amusing was that in Rosencraft, spiders were regarded as some of the most despicable and malicious creatures, triggering significant fears and phobias. In stark contrast, Katherine found them captivating and hardworking. She abhorred laziness and inactivity, the widespread lethargy that was prevalent among the true Rosencraftians.

Katherine held a deep respect for spiders and enjoyed having tea in Rosencraft. It was a way for her to still feel connected to the world and, in her unique way, a part of the England she had grown up in but had been pulled away from. As she travelled to other countries and cities, their influence seeped into her, shaping some of her habits. The tea ritual wasn't a significant concern for her before—back when she attracted Adam Redwood, when they got married, and they led a content life as outcasts. That was before he convinced her to join him in Rosencraft, a place that could be geographically situated, but in reality, belonged to nowhere

specific. It had its own set of rules, a microcosm, an untouchable kingdom seamlessly detached from any polity in the world.

Years later, for Emily Redwood, it would remain the same—an unsettling repetition. The allure cast by spiders and every small, industrious, wild, and free creature continued to draw her in and instil hope. Because, like her mother Katherine, she was a prisoner. The difference was that Emily had never experienced anything different. She had never tasted the sweetness of freedom, as she arrived in Rosencraft at a tender age. Freedom, for her, was merely a legend, an ideal. However, *hearts of stone, bones of stone, guts of stone, stones everywhere*, constituted the relentless and enduring reality she had always faced. Katherine’s description was, for Emily, a devastating daily truth.

‘Daughter of an outcast, daughter of a bitch!’

Words that, for a significant part of her childhood, eluded Emily’s understanding. To her, they held no more weight than any other casual expression uttered throughout the day, such as “shall we go for a walk?” and “luckily, it’s not raining today.”

During those early years, she responded in kind, treating them as commonplace greetings.

‘Daughter of an outcast, daughter of a bitch!’, uttered in her sweet and melodic voice, accompanied by the enchantment of her big dark eyes, her smooth and silky black hair, and her fresh and delicate little face.

Because Emily, much like Katherine, was destined to attract, whether she desired it or not, intentionally or unintentionally. In the end, she found herself sharing similarities with some other outcasts. Destined to love. Destined to wait.

Yet, ultimately, she would also remain true to herself. Destined to kill.

CHAPTER 2

Solitude was a constant presence for Katherine Kingstone. A crushing presence. It evolved into the Solitudes, taking on a name and a soul, albeit a dark and corrupted one. These entities remained indifferent until they eventually overwhelmed and extinguished the individual. Katherine faced them relentlessly. While Solitudes existed universally, in the town of Rosencraft, they had proliferated like wildfire—much like Rosencraft itself—from a corrupt core, spreading their influence in a perpetual and cyclical motion.

Additionally, there were the Victims of Solitudes. Victims were always present, both within and beyond Rosencraft, existing since time immemorial. Yet, in Rosencraft, Victims seemed to have no means of escape, precisely due to the Solitudes. They were there to be trampled, insulted, and repeatedly beaten down. Victims to prey upon.

Emily Redwood, even before she realised it, would become the ultimate Victim. To console herself, she kept a diary—an anthology of her existence in Rosencraft. The sort of litany repeated by Katherine, *everything returns to Rosencraft*, heard during her childhood, had become ingrained in her.

“Everything returns to Rosencraft. I don’t. I stay. I must stay. They bind me with invisible chains of anger and possession.”

ER

Emily Redwood, Outcast of Rosencraft. It all boiled down to those two letters, like a cruel twist of fate, summarising a lifetime bound by rules that no outsider could ever dream of overcoming.

The layout of Rosencraft closely resembled that of other towns in the English countryside. It featured a town centre, a church, a modest park, a cinema with somewhat outdated screenings (better than none), a library, a handful of shops, a couple of pubs, a cafeteria, a restaurant, and a hotel offering a limited number of rooms. It was a town like many others, expanding to the north and gradually transitioning into open countryside and surrounding woods. Its appearance was commonplace, with travellers appreciating its sense of order and, above all, its almost primitive charm—a

quaint rustic gem nestled between urban sprawl and rural landscapes. A picturesque oasis that visitors crossed with delight. However, these visitors were always just passing through; none stayed for more than a day and night at the local hotel managed by Minette Pinkfellow, who had inherited it from her parents a few years earlier. Their stay was only as long as necessary before moving on to their next destination.

Everyone in Rosencraft was familiar with the founding families, information that was practically unavoidable. The story of the town's foundation constituted a significant portion of the local educational curriculum. Despite being unknown beyond its borders, Rosencraft functioned as a sort of unacknowledged microcosm within the broader, recognised state.

The founding families were now divided into four classes that did not have many survivors among their members, but still sufficient to preserve the traditions: wealthy founding families, middle-class founding families, humble founding families and wealthy founding families but which were now almost extinct. Nothing complicated, apparently. But the ancient vicissitudes regarding aversions, offenses and alliances between the founding families were quite convoluted and complex. Then there were the other inhabitants, united by more or less close ties with the founding families.

The nucleus of the wealthy founding families included the Rosencrafts—the town's namesake—the Brownhalls, and the Redwoods. Adam Redwood, Emily's father, was the final descendant of the affluent Redwood lineage. Adam's parents, Tessa and Sten, along with his older brother Ian, his sister-in-law Jenny Blackmirror, and their young son Dirk, died in what was officially labelled as a *tragic accident* during a visit to their countryside estate on the northern border of Rosencraft. The large family villa unfortunately caught fire on a particularly dark and stormy night.

The event had been officially recorded as a *tragic accident*, a *terrible tragedy*, or similar expressions. However, the undeniable truth was that Dana Rosencraft, the sister of Morris Rosencraft, the present mayor, was expected to marry Ian Redwood. Regrettably, Ian, to the dismay of all involved (including himself, given the outcome), had fallen in love with Jenny Blackmirror, a descendant of a once wealthy but now humble family,

and had chosen to marry her. Jenny, unfortunately for him, shared his feelings and agreed to the union.

Prior to the *disastrous downfall*, Adam Redwood, the sole surviving member of the family, was considered a handsome, ambitious, and wise young man. Tall, with a robust physique, deep blue eyes, and thick black hair, he maintained his composure and discovered the determination and bravery needed to respond. Sufficient to overcome the tragedy with all the necessary fortitude of character.

However, a few years later, Adam demonstrated that wisdom was clearly not among his virtues. He committed the unforgivable mistake of leaving, completely abandoning his town in an almost abrupt manner, expressing suspicions about the *tragic accident* involving his family. He fell in love with an outcast, Katherine Kingstone, and married her. In Rosencraft, this shift in his fate was labelled the *disastrous downfall*. Even more reprehensibly, he later chose to return to Rosencraft with his wife and young daughter Emily, openly displaying the joy of his selection of that captivating and bold woman. Given his status as the last descendant of a wealthy founding family, it would have been more fitting to opt for a *pure blood*, preferably from the Rosencraft or Brownhall lineage. Instead, his actions proved to be more outrageous than those of his brother Ian. Evidently, the Redwood offspring were rebels lacking both integrity and class, resolute in their determination to love, marry, and, worse yet, procreate with whoever they pleased!

The middle-class founding families, which included the Whitelands, Pinkfellows, and Yellowstars, had a predominantly subservient relationship with the Rosencrafts. This dynamic also extended to the humble founding families, the Greyhammers, Greenshows, and Blackmirrors, although the Blackmirrors represented a unique case. While they were wealthy during the town's founding, bitter conflicts with the Rosencrafts led to their subsequent impoverishment. Unlike the Darksees and Lightstorms, founding families doomed to extinction by the Rosencrafts due to rumoured occult powers exhibited during the town's early days, the Blackmirrors at least survived. Ian Redwood's unfortunate choice to fall in love with Jenny, a Blackmirror, exacerbated the tensions.

Due to an unfortunate series of events entirely beyond her control, Emily Redwood found herself alone following the death of both her parents. Born

during her parents' stay in Paris, a city situated well outside the confines of Rosencraft, she could have enjoyed a tranquil and serene life, possibly even a happy one, had Adam Redwood not entertained the ill-conceived notion of returning to Rosencraft. Driven, perhaps for the first time in his life, to assert his claims over the town and its possessions. It might not have been a deliberate choice on his part to return, but a peculiar chain of unfortunate circumstances almost compelled him to make a decision that resulted in the disintegration of his family and ultimately his own demise.

Adam's dream had always been to dedicate himself to the design and construction of ships. However, following the failure of his shipbuilding business, he was adamant about the necessity of reclaiming his assets in Rosencraft. This was a crucial move to re-enter the industry and regain control of the business shares he had reluctantly relinquished. Among these assets was what had long been referred to as the *Redwood treasure*. For the first time in his life, Adam was determined to locate it—desperately so. Unfortunately, things went wrong. So wrong that he not only lost his beloved Katherine but, a few years later, also his own life.

In the end, Emily found herself in the same place where Adam had left her—the home of Trudy Whiteland, Adam's second wife following Katherine's disappearance. Life with her stepmother and Fiona, Trudy's daughter from a previous marriage, was a continuous cycle of hardships, difficulties, and humiliation. *Rosencraft High*, the school where Emily devoted herself with an almost excessive commitment considering her young age and circumstances, was a mirror of Trudy's house. Yet, Emily Redwood had nothing else. Books provided Emily with an escape from the pain; within their pages, she often forgot she was alive.

She always left home earlier than Fiona and the other students, finding solace in the school library. Emily delved into various books, without a preference for any subject in particular. Her choices were guided by words, driven by an almost instinctive impulse, as if the book she picked at that moment was destined to come into her possession by some higher force. She never questioned the nature of this *higher* influence; it didn't concern her too much.

Thus, she alternated between fiction, essays, science books, or history. It mattered little to Emily. At eleven years old, her thirst for knowledge was driven by a specific purpose: the desire to leave Rosencraft one day. She

could already envision her departure. Upon turning eighteen, she aimed to bid farewell to Rosencraft permanently, never to return. Her plan from the outside was to unveil the dark conspiracies of the Rosencrafts—those she had heard mentioned by Katherine in her childhood, those she had heard from Adam during heated debates, and those that had lingered in her mind like an eternal waltz of evil and deceit. This grand scheme was the focus of Emily's meticulous and deliberate preparations, day after day.

Constantly overwhelmed by pain, she found herself stunned and bewildered by the relentless and seemingly remorseless cruelty inflicted upon her by her fellow beings. It felt as if she were a small, caged animal destined for slaughter. This analogy wasn't too far from the truth, considering how the residents of Rosencraft treated the animals. These creatures were systematically driven from the woods to an area known as the *Founders' Reserve*, where they became victims of the aggressive instincts of the townsfolk when the Rosencrafts decided to open the hunting season.

However, in Emily's stubborn little heart, something was beginning to shift. The real turning point happened one morning, as always, while she was heading to school well ahead of the others.

It was an October morning, and the warm summer climate had changed into crisp autumn air. On the pavement, the tree leaves displayed beautiful hues, a spectrum of colours ranging from orange to red to gold. Due to this vivid and bright amalgamation of colours, Emily initially failed to notice anything else.

It was the eyes that drew her attention. Not so much the colour, of a delicate greenish-blue shade, but the pain those eyes enclosed—the glimmer she would learn to recognise. The light so intense and desperate of someone leaving life.

'What have they done to you?' Emily took a few steps towards it. But then she stopped, remaining still, staring at it.

A little injured fox lay on the ground, partially concealed among the autumn leaves that blended with its orange-red fur. Clearly, it couldn't respond to her. Not because it chose not to, but because it was merely an animal. It couldn't speak because it was dying.

'Poor little one...' Emily approached it, instinctively lowering herself beside it. 'What have they done to you?'

She wasn't expecting a response. She was well aware of what had been done to it. Clearly, the hunting had begun. Cornering, injuring, and trampling—much like what they subjected her to daily, though she managed to survive. Killing an animal, especially a fox, was a source of pride and status in Rosencraft. Killing a human being, not so much. Not overtly, at least. Killing her was unthinkable, at least for the next seven years. At least until she would inherit the Redwood treasure, turning herself into prey.

Emily rested her left hand over her heart. With the other hand, she tenderly stroked the dying fox. Its luminous blue-green eyes, fading away from life, merged with hers, creating a profound connection. They became one.

She could do nothing but remain silent. She gently guided the fox to the afterlife—a realm where it would never again endure the torment of being surrounded, wounded, or trampled. A realm free from victimhood.

Emily's tears continued to flow as pain gradually left the small fox's body and soul. However, the glow of those eyes, filled with suffering, endured. Even as the little fox departed from life, it seemed to weep.

'It's okay, little one. It's okay. You'll be fine.'

Emily's chant echoed for a long time. Completely absorbed, she lost track of everything, including herself. Even upon regaining self-consciousness, parting from the little fox was difficult. Nevertheless, she knew she had to do so promptly to avoid facing the consequences of her clumsy and unacceptable actions once again.

Unlike many of its kind, the little fox displayed remarkable courage. Despite nearing death, it had mustered the strength to reach the town centre, the tree-lined avenue that led to the school. It exhibited the strength to escape from the Founders' Reserve where it had suffered injuries, staging a final act of rebellion. Its presence in that location felt like an accusation, a form of condemnation.

The meeting with Emily hadn't spared the little fox, but it might have rescued the girl who had comforted, caressed, and stood by its side in its final moments. From that point onward, Emily Redwood, absorbing all the distress and suffering of the small creature, genuinely stirred to life. She started recalling, urging herself to transcend memory—beyond her mother's daring words and boldness, beyond her father's ambition and strength. A transformation begun within her.

CHAPTER 3

Someone was watching her. Emily became acutely aware of it as soon as she summoned the strength to get up. Despite everything, it was too early for the other students. Her perception of time got distorted. She had stayed with the fox for a long time, but not long enough to feel threatened by the arrival of other human beings heading toward the same destination. Regardless, she wouldn't have minded. It wasn't something she had anticipated.

She cast a final glance at the lifeless body of the small fox. Soon, someone would come to collect and dispose of it. Briefly, the idea crossed her mind to give it a proper burial, to return it to its natural habitat. She wondered where its true environment might be—the forest or the reserve where they had confined it? However, a sudden movement behind her urged her to escape, to find shelter. Someone was indeed observing her, and this wasn't the first time she noticed it. She ran straight towards the school gate. She anticipated that, at any moment, someone would start hunting her too.

She expected that in Rosencraft, the relentless hunting of beings other than animals would soon be permitted and encouraged. Rosencraft was a timeless place. A place without rules, or worse, governed by its own set of rules. The act of killing was a source of pride, particularly when it came to hunting animals, especially foxes, and even those individuals who, by consensus, were categorised as animals.

Those who didn't practise hunting were ostracised in Rosencraft. For a man, it meant relegation to the lowest social tier, enduring mockery, ridicule, and mistreatment until the end of his days. For a woman, disapproving of hunting was like public humiliation, warranting no favourable treatment. It reduced her to the status of an outcast. A bitch. Because outcasts, like Katherine, were bitches who deprived the respectable native women of Rosencraft of their men. It was unacceptable and unforgivable. There were already enough, or even too many, women in Rosencraft! Why choose an outsider?

The circumstances differed for men coming from outside. While they might not be held in the same esteem as the founders, the natives, and their

descendants, they were still welcomed and accepted. Given the surplus of women compared to men in Rosencraft, it was deemed appropriate for these women to seek a partner from outside and integrate him into the community. Remaining single and independent was viewed unfavourably in Rosencraft, with such women not facing the same harsh judgement as outcasts, but risking following the same path, the same miserable fate.

That was why Adam Redwood entered a second marriage with the widow Trudy Whiteland. It was out of necessity. It was an attempt to provide Emily with a semblance of normalcy and family following Katherine's disappearance, all the while striving to gain control over his properties and the Redwood treasure. But it had always been a façade. An overly forced one.

Trudy, initially married to Gary Whiteland in her first marriage, belonged to a mid-tier founding family and was a descendant of the Greenshows. In the early days, Adam attempted to make his relationship with Trudy work, either genuinely or feignedly, fully aware that turning the impossible into reality was beyond his reach. Katherine, with her captivating beauty, the gentle waves of her hair, and her large dark eyes, continued to dominate every aspect of his being—his thoughts, soul, and body. Touching Trudy with his eyes closed forced him to become inebriated, hoping to numb himself in sexual intercourse that consistently left him broken and devastated. Trudy, on her part, offered him no respite.

'Now you're married to me!' she would yell at him, clinging to him. 'With me, not her anymore!'

However, Adam never succumbed to Katherine's disappearance. Even though she had been declared legally dead, she had truly vanished, or been forced to vanish. The result remained an ever-present void, leaving a man who would never find peace until he found her or reached her.

In the end, he gave up. Adam Redwood was officially declared to have died of a heart attack. On a winter morning, leaning against a poplar tree beyond the garden fence of what had briefly been his and Katherine's home in Rosencraft. He visited there daily, obstinately refusing to sell it, clutching tightly to his memories. He stood motionless, gazing at the small red brick house he had considered his sanctuary, the hope that would bring something grander and more beautiful to him and his family. He died of grief or remorse.

Emily, at the age of nine, found herself alone with Trudy, widowed for the second time and filled with fury at her unfulfilled goals. Trudy was accompanied by her daughter Fiona, who was hostile toward her stepsister. Above all, Emily awaited the Redwood treasure, intended exclusively for her and hidden in an unknown location. She would inherit it on her eighteenth birthday, or it would be donated to charity in the unfortunate event of her premature death. This was Adam Redwood's stipulation in his last wishes, deposited at Charles Rosencraft's study before his peaceful departure to the afterlife. This was the sole assurance Emily had about her life. Charles Rosencraft, Morris' younger brother, was an apathetic and unremarkable man, indifferent to social life and the limelight, yet his integrity was unquestioned, even by Adam. The choice to entrust his final wishes to a Rosencraft indicated his lack of trust in his second wife and other individuals who eagerly surrounded him.

In Emily's childlike heart, she harboured a suspicion she had never dared to express, not even to her father, especially not to him. Revealing it would be like accusing him of sacrificing her mother, himself, and ultimately her, for nothing. Emily suspected that the Redwood treasure might not exist at all. It seemed like a legend concocted by her ancestors and fervently supported by Sten, her grandfather, to ensure that the Redwoods avoided joining the fallen founding families. However, she never dared to disclose this suspicion to anyone, as the absence of the treasure would condemn her. The treasure still guaranteed her a few more years of life.

Emily's memories of her life before Rosencraft comprised of fleeting images that occasionally surfaced in her memory. She had seen sudden flashes of red buses in London, car horns, city noises, flowered gardens where she ran, the sweet and intense scent of her mother, and her father grabbing her around the waist, lifting her up as if flying. Yet, she also retained an auditory memory, akin to words in languages she had seen written in books—French, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, Italian, Polish, Russian, German. Although she hadn't practised many of these languages, the memories lingered unconsciously.

Her mother often read to her, not only in English but also in French and Italian, allowing Emily to understand them quite well. Katherine believed in early education, reading stories that Emily couldn't fully comprehend yet, but she let herself be immersed in the sound of her mother's voice and the

harmony created by those sentences, satisfying her little heart hungry for love and knowledge. Katherine read works by William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, George Sand, Luigi Pirandello, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Sibilla Aleramo, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Mary Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the Brontë sisters. Emily inherited her name from Emily Brontë, Katherine's favourite. She read the classics of world literature and her fair share of modern and contemporary literature.

Images of Stratford-upon-Avon, the town where Katherine had grown up, overlaid everything else. It was there that Emily dreamed of escaping and living, at least at first, until she had the strength to go elsewhere. Stratford-upon-Avon lived mainly through her father's memories and descriptions, through her mother's books, and Emily's research in the school library. All in all, it didn't seem so different from Rosencraft in terms of structure, density, layout, and surrounding countryside. But she hoped that the external similarity corresponded to a complete internal difference. In her diary, she called it *SUA* to keep her escape plans from being discovered. However, she couldn't resist the temptation to dream about it, to label it at least with an acronym, to sense it truly *hers* in the Italian language, just like it had been for her mother, Katherine.

Immersing herself in *SUA* through books and stories, Emily distanced herself from everything else. She could navigate school, ignore insults and teasing, return home, and continue to ignore Trudy's reproaches and accusations. At some point, given that nothing seemed to affect her, Trudy was convinced that her stepdaughter was either intellectually challenged or utterly stupid. At the same time, Emily convinced herself that not contradicting that notion was in her best interest.

Thus, by pretending to be completely stupid, Emily Redwood managed to survive and reach the age of twelve.

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